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SOME TRAITS OF PRIMITIVE CULTURE.

THE needs of anthropological research have led many investigators to adapt themselves as thoroughly as may be to the ways of thinking of foreign tribes and peoples, — to take part in the joys and sorrows of their life, to penetrate the motives that prompt their actions, and to share the emotions that fill their hearts. The experiences thus gathered have led many of us to think that the gulf does not exist that was once believed to separate the mind of primitive man from that of civilized man. The difference between the type of primitive thought and feeling and that of our own appears to us rather as a product of the diversity of the cultures that furnish the material with which the mind operates than as the result of a fundamental difference in mental organization.

Nevertheless we cannot close our eyes to the typical differences that do exist between the modes of thought and action characteristic of primitive society and of civilized society, and the question of their origin must be considered one of the great problems of anthropological research.

In the following remarks I will try to formulate anew one trait of primitive mental life that early attracted the attention of investigators, namely, the general lack of differentiation of mental activities. In primitive life, religion and science; music, poetry, and dance; myth and history; fashion and ethics, — appear to us inextricably interwoven. We may express this general observation also by saying that primitive man views each action not only as adapted to its main object, each thought as related to its main end, as we should perceive them, but that he associates them with other ideas, often of a religious or at least of a symbolic nature. Thus he gives them a higher significance than they seem to us to deserve. Every taboo is an example of such associations of apparently trifling actions with ideas that are so sacred that a deviation from the customary mode of performance creates the strongest emotions of abhorrence. The interpretation of ornaments as charms, the symbolism of decorative art, are other examples of association of ideas, that, on the whole, are foreign to our mode of thought.

In order to make clear the point of view from which these phenomena seem to fall into an orderly array, we will investigate whether all vestiges of similar forms of thought have disappeared from our civilization. In our intense life, which is devoted to activities requiring the full application of our reasoning powers and a repression of the emotional life, we have become accustomed to a cold, matter-of-fact view of our actions, of the incentives that lead to them,

and of their consequences. It is not necessary, however, to go far afield to find a state of mind which is open to other aspects of life. If those among us who move in the midst of the current of our quickly pulsing life do not look beyond their rational motives and aims, others who stand by in quiet contemplation recognize in it the reflection of an ideal world that they have built up in their own consciousness. To the artist the outer world is a symbol of the beauty that he feels; to the fervent religious mind it is a symbol of the transcendental truth which gives form to his thought. Instrumental music that one enjoys as a work of purely musical art calls forth in the mind of another a group of definite concepts that are connected with the musical themes and their treatment only by the similarity of the emotional states they evoke. In fact, the different manner in which individuals react to the same stimulus, and the variety of associations elicited by the same sense-impression in different individuals, are so self-evident that they hardly call for special remarks.

More important, for the purpose of our investigation, than the observations just mentioned, is the fact that there are certain stimuli to which all of us who live in the same society react in the same way without our being able to express the reasons for our actions. A good example of what I refer to are breaches of social etiquette. A mode of behavior that does not conform to the customary manners, but differs from them in a striking way, creates, on the whole, unpleasant emotions; and it requires a determined effort on our part to make it clear to ourselves that such behavior does not conflict with moral standards. Among those who are not trained in courageous and rigid thought, the confusion between traditional etiquette — so-called good manners — and moral conduct is habitual. In certain lines of conduct the association between traditional etiquette and ethical feeling is so close that even a vigorous thinker can hardly emancipate himself from it. This is true, for instance, of acts that may be considered breaches of modesty. The most cursory review of the history of costume shows that what was considered modest at one time has been immodest at other times. The custom of habitually covering parts of the body has at all times led to the strong feeling that exposure of such parts is immodest. This feeling of propriety is so erratic that a costume that is appropriate on one occasion may be considered opprobrious on other occasions; as, for instance, a low-cut evening dress in a street car during business hours. What kind of exposure is felt as immodest depends always upon fashion. It is quite evident that fashion is not dictated by modesty, but that the historical development of costume is determined by a variety of causes. Nevertheless fashions are typically associated with the feeling of modesty, so that an unwonted exposure excites

the unpleasant feelings of impropriety. There is no conscious reasoning why the one form is proper, the other improper ; but the feeling is aroused directly by the contrast with the customary.

For another example we need go back only a short period in history. It is not so many years ago that dissension from accepted religious tenets was believed to be a crime. The intolerance of diverging religious views and the energy of persecution for heresy can be understood only when we recognize the violent feelings of outraged ethical principles that were aroused by this deviation from the customary line of thought. There was no question as to the logical validity of the new idea. The mind was directly agitated by the opposition to an habitual form of thought which was so deeply rooted in each individual that it had come to be an integral part of his mental life.

It is important to note that in both the cases mentioned the rationalistic explanation of the opposition to a change is based on that group of concepts with which the excited emotions are intimately connected. In the first case, reasons are adduced why the new style of costume is improper ; in the second case, proof is given that the new doctrine is an attack against eternal truth.

I think, however, that a close introspective analysis shows these reasons to be only attempts to interpret our feelings of displeasure ; that our opposition is not by any means dictated by conscious reasoning, but primarily by the emotional effect of the new idea which creates a dissonance with the habitual.

It may be well to exemplify the characteristics of our opposition to unwonted actions by a few additional examples, which will help to clear up the mental processes that lead us to formulate the reasons for our conservatism. We are not accustomed to eat caterpillars, and we should probably decline to eat them from feelings of disgust. On the other hand, the aversion to eating dogs or horses or cats would probably be based rather on the seeming impropriety of eating animals that live with us as our friends. Cannibalism is so much abhorred that we find it difficult to convince ourselves that it belongs to the same class of aversions as those mentioned before. The fundamental concept of the sacredness of human life, and the fact that most animals will not eat others of the same species, set off cannibalism as a custom by itself, considered as one of the most horrible aberrations of human nature. In these three groups of aversions, disgust is probably the first feeling present in our minds, by which we react against the suggestion of partaking of these kinds of food. We account for our disgust by a variety of reasons, according to the groups of ideas with which the suggested act is associated in our minds. In the first case, there is no special association, and

we are satisfied with the simple statement of disgust. In the second case, the most important reason seems an emotional one, although we may feel inclined, when questioned regarding the reasons of our dislike, to bring forward also habits of the animals in question that seem to justify our aversion. In the third case, the immorality of cannibalism would stand forth as the one sufficient reason.

Another example may not be out of place. A variety of reasons are given why certain styles of dress are improper. To see a man wear a hat in company indoors nettles us; it is considered rude. To wear a hat in church or at a funeral would cause more vigorous resentment on account of the greater emotional value of the feelings concerned. A certain tilt of the hat, although it may be very comfortable to the wearer, would stamp him at once as an uneducated brute. Other novelties in costume may hurt our æsthetic feelings, no matter how bad the taste of our fashions may be.

In all these cases the custom is obeyed so often and so regularly that the habitual act becomes automatic, and remains entirely sub-conscious. It is only when an infraction of the customary occurs, that all the groups of ideas with which the action is associated are brought into consciousness. A dish of dog's meat would bring up all the ideas of companionship; a cannibal feast, all the altruistic principles that have become our second nature. The more automatic any series of activities or a certain form of thought has become, the greater is the conscious effort required for the breaking off from the old habit of acting and thinking, and the greater also the displeasure, or at least the surprise, produced by an innovation. The antagonism against it is a reflex action accompanied by emotions not due to conscious speculation. When we become conscious of this emotional reaction, we endeavor to interpret it by a process of reasoning. This reasoning must necessarily be based on the ideas which rise into consciousness as soon as a break in the established custom occurs; in other words, our rationalistic explanation will depend upon the character of the associated ideas.

It is therefore of great importance to know whence the associated ideas are derived, particularly in how far we may assume that these associations are stable. It is not quite easy to give definite examples of changes of such associations in our own culture, because, on the whole, the rationalistic tendencies of our times have eliminated many of the lines of association, even where the emotional effect remains; so that the change, on the whole, is one from existing associations to loss of associations. I pointed out before the rise of associations between fashions and feelings of modesty which arise with the establishment of a new type of costume. There are a great number of customs that had originally a religious or semi-reli-

gious aspect which are continued and explained by more or less certain utilitarian theories. Such are the whole group of customs relating to marriages in the incest group. While the extent of the incest group has undergone material changes, the abhorrence of marriages inside the existing group is the same as ever ; but instead of religious laws, ethical considerations often explained by utilitarian concepts are given as the reason for our feelings. People affected with loathsome diseases were once shunned because they were believed to be stricken by God, while at present the same avoidance is due to the fear of contagion. The disuse into which profanity has fallen in English was first due to religious reaction, but has come to be simply a question of good manners.

In short, while each habit is the result of historical causes, it may in course of time associate itself with different ideas. As soon as we become conscious of an association between a habit and a certain group of ideas, we are led to explain the habit by its present associations, which probably differ from the associations prevailing at the time when the habit was established.

We will now turn to a consideration of analogous phenomena in primitive life. Here the dislike of that which deviates from the custom of the land is even more strongly marked than in our own civilization. If it is not the custom to sleep in a house with feet turned towards the fire, a violation of this custom is dreaded and avoided. If it is not customary to eat seal and walrus on the same day, nobody will dare to transgress this law. If in a certain society members of the same clan do not intermarry, the most deep-seated abhorrence against such unions will arise. It is not necessary to multiply examples, for it is a well-known fact that the more primitive a people, the more it is bound by customs regulating the conduct of daily life in all its details. I think we are justified in concluding, from our own experience, that, as among ourselves, so among primitive tribes, the resistance to a deviation from firmly established customs is due to an emotional reaction, not to conscious reasoning. This does not preclude the possibility that the first special act, which became in course of time customary, may have been due to a conscious mental process, but it seems to me likely that many customs came into being without any conscious activity. Their development must have been of the same kind as that of the categories which are reflected in the morphology of languages, and which can never have been known to the speakers of these languages. For instance, if we accept Cunow's theory of the origin of Australian social systems,¹ we may very well

¹ Some Australian tribes are divided into four exogamic groups. The laws of exogamy demand that a member of the first group must marry a member of the second group, and a member of the third group one of the fourth group. The

say that originally each generation kept by themselves, and therefore marriages between members of two succeeding generations were impossible, because only marriageable men and women of one generation came into contact. Later on, when the succeeding generations were not so diverse in age, and their social separation ceased, the custom was established, and did not lapse with the changed conditions. We may also imagine a tribe which had never had an opportunity of eating fish, moving toward the sea and still abstaining from the unaccustomed food. These imaginary cases make it clear that the unconscious origin of customs is quite conceivable, although of course not necessary. It seems, however, certain that even when there has been a conscious reasoning that led to the establishment of a custom, it soon ceased to be conscious, and instead we find a direct emotional resistance to an infraction of the custom.

It might seem that in primitive society, where the whole community follow the same customs, opportunity could hardly be given to bring into consciousness the strong emotional resistance against infractions. There is one feature of social life, however, that tends to keep the attachment to the customary before the minds of the people, and that is the education of the young. While many of the customs that enter into the every-day life, and which are observed and performed constantly, may be imitated by the young and imparted without teaching, there are others which are not performed quite so often that can be transmitted only by precept. Any one familiar with primitive life will know that the children are constantly exhorted to follow the example of their elders, and every collection of carefully recorded traditions contains numerous references to advice given by parents to children to observe the customs of the tribe. The greater the emotional value of a custom, the stronger will be the desire to inculcate it in the minds of the young. Thus ample opportunity is given to bring the resistance against infractions into consciousness; and thus occasions must arise when people, either led by children's questions or following their own bent to speculation, look for explanations of the custom. These will be based on the general ideas current among the tribe and related to the custom in question, but probably not at all related to its historical origin.

children of these unions belong respectively to the third and fourth, and first and second groups, according to the group to which the father or mother belongs. According to Cunow's theory, the first and second groups represent one generation, the third and fourth the next generation. Thus it will be seen that each generation is divided into two exogamic groups. These exogamic groups persist through the generations. The curious crossing is brought about by the restriction of marriages to members of the same generation.

The explanations of customs that are given by primitive man are generally based on concepts that are intimately related to his general views of the constitution of the world. Some mythological idea may be considered the basis of a custom or an avoidance. It may be interpreted as of symbolic significance, or it may merely be connected with the fear of ill luck. Evidently this last class of explanations are identical with those of many superstitions that linger among us.

Investigators like Spencer and Tylor, who have tried to clear up the history of avoidances as well as of other customs, hold the view that their origin lies in primitive man's view of nature; that to him the world is filled with agencies of superhuman power, which may harm man at the slightest provocation, and that fear of them dictates the innumerable superstitious regulations. These authors express their views in words which would make it appear as though the habits and opinions of primitive man had been formed by conscious reasoning. It seems evident, however, that this is not a necessary part of their theories. Their whole line of thought would remain consistent if it is assumed that the processes were all subconscious. I believe that these theories need extension, because it would seem that many cases of this kind may have arisen without any kind of reasoning, conscious or subconscious, for instance, cases in which a custom became established by the general conditions of life, and came into consciousness as soon as these conditions changed. I do not doubt at all that there are cases in which customs originated by more or less conscious reasoning; but I am just as certain that others originated without, and that our theories should cover both points.

We must include in our consideration also customs for which other types of explanations are given. If among the Indians of Vancouver Island it is bad form for a young woman of nobility to open her mouth wide and to eat fast, a deviation from this custom would also be deeply felt, but in this case as an impropriety which would seriously damage the social standing of the culprit. The same group of feelings are concerned when a member of the nobility — even in Europe — marries below her station. In other more trifling cases, the overstepping of the boundaries of custom merely exposes the offender to ridicule on account of the impropriety of the act. All these cases belong psychologically to the same group of emotional reactions against breaks with established automatic habits.

We have so far discussed only cases of emotional resistance against unwonted actions and their associations. There are other groups of phenomena, however, in which diverse mental states and activities occur in close association, although no direct causal relation

between them is apparent. In these cases also long-continued historical association accounts for the present state of affairs.

Sombre colors and depressed feelings are closely connected in our minds, although not in those of peoples of foreign cultures. Noise seems inappropriate in a place of sadness, although among primitive people the loud wail of the mourners is the natural expression of grief. Decorative art serves to please the eye, yet a design like the cross has retained its symbolic significance.

On the whole, such associations between groups of ideas apparently unrelated are rare in civilized life. That they once existed is shown by historical evidence as well as by survivals in which the old ideas have perished, although the outer form remains. In primitive culture these associations occur in great numbers. In discussing them we may begin with examples that have their analogues in our own civilization, and which therefore are readily intelligible to us.

The most extended domain of such customs is that of ritual. We have numerous stated ritual forms accompanying important actions which are constantly applied, although their original significance has been lost entirely. Many of them are so old that their origin must be looked for in antiquity or even in prehistoric times. In our day the domain of ritual is restricted, but in primitive culture it pervades the whole life. Not a single action of any importance can be performed that is not accompanied by proscribed rites of more or less elaborate form. It has been proved in many cases that rites are more stable than their explanations; that they symbolize different ideas among different people and at different times. The diversity of rites is so great, and their occurrence so universal, that here the greatest possible variety of associations are found.

It seems to my mind that we may apply this point of view to many of the most fundamental and inexplicable traits of primitive life, and that when considered as associations between heterogeneous thoughts and activities, their rise and history become more readily intelligible.

The symbolism of decorative art seems to belong to this domain. A vestige of this form of association remains in our use of the cross, or in the patriotic use of national emblems which restrict the applicability of these forms as purely ornamental motives, and determine their significance wherever they occur. In primitive society this symbolic interpretation is much more widely spread. Among many primitive peoples of all parts of the world, no matter what the history of their decorative art may have been, the association between decorative element and ideas apparently foreign to its forms is found. For years the theory held sway that this association must have developed from an actual historic correlation, from the fact that the geo-

metrical form is developed from the realistic form. I have tried to show¹ that in certain cases the association is a secondary one, and in these views I am entirely in accord with Dr. Karl von den Steinen and with Professor Hamlin.² The characteristic trait of primitive art is its strong tendency to associate itself with ideas foreign to its artistic purport. What these ideas are depends upon the character of the culture in which they occur.

On the North Pacific coast of America the animal design which is found in many other parts of the world has associated itself firmly with the totemic idea, and has led to an unparalleled application of animal motives. This may also have helped to preserve the realistic character of this art. Among the Sioux the high valuation of military prowess and the habit of exploiting deeds of war before the tribe have been the causes that led the men to associate the decoration on their garments with events of war, so that among them a military symbolism has developed, while the women of the same tribe explain the same design in an entirely different manner.³ It seems to me that in this last case we have no particular difficulty in following the line of thought that leads to the association between forms of decoration and military ideas, although, in general, our minds require a much more conscious effort than that of primitive man. The very fact of the well-nigh universal occurrence of decorative symbolism shows that this association must establish itself automatically and without conscious reasoning.

We may go a step farther, and observe from our general point of view the relation between social organization and religion. To us family organization as such has been freed almost entirely from the religious aspect, which survives chiefly in the religious sanction of marriage. The religious rites connected with birth and death have lost almost all connection with family organization. Among primitive men we find, on the other hand, a type of association which is quite analogous to that found in decorative art. As there form tends to associate itself with ideas entirely foreign to it, so the social unit tends to associate itself with various impressions of nature, particularly with the divisions of the animal world. This form of association seems to me the fundamental trait of totemism. It is difficult for us to appreciate the psychological process by means of which these associations are established. It would seem that one of the fundamental requirements must be the feeling that a family, or some other social group, is absolutely distinct from all other social groups.

¹ *Popular Science Monthly*, October, 1903, pp. 481 *et seq.*

² *The American Architect and Building News*, 1898.

³ Dr. Clark Wissler, "The Decorative Art of the Sioux Indians," *Bulletin American Museum of Natural History*, vol. xviii.

This granted, the establishment of association with the supernatural world becomes at least intelligible. That such feelings are not by any means improbable, or even rare, is sufficiently shown by the exclusiveness of the European high nobility, or by the national emotions in their pronounced form. It is not at all difficult to understand how an overbearing enthusiasm of self-appreciation of a community may become a powerful emotion or a passion which, on account of the lack of rational explanation of the world, will tend to associate the members of the community with all that is good and powerful. However these associations may have been brought about, there is no doubt that they do exist, and that, psychologically considered, they are of the same character as those previously discussed, and that the rationalizing mind of man soon lost the historic thread and reinterpreted the established customs in conformity with the general trend of thought of his culture. We are therefore justified in concluding that these customs must also be studied by the pragmatic method, because their present associations are not likely to be original, but rather secondary.

When we once recognize the general applicability of the theory of the historical modification of associations, we can no longer hope to establish one single line of origin and development of institutions like totemism, or of religious systems, because the theories of those who hold to such systems are without historic value, and express only types of association; but we are rather led to the problem what associations are typical of various forms of culture, and how they will affect the thoughts and activities of man. These associations may again fall into order; no longer, however, as forming a genetically connected system, but as a series of phenomena that arise ever anew, according to the type of culture of each people, and influenced by historical and geographical transmission.

It is perhaps venturesome to discuss at the present moment these types of association; yet it may be admissible to dwell on a few of the most generalized facts which seem to characterize primitive culture as compared to civilization. From our point of view, the striking features of primitive culture are the great number of associations of entirely heterogeneous groups of phenomena, such as natural phenomena and individual emotion, social groupings and religious concepts, decorative art and symbolic interpretation. These tend to disappear with the approach to our present civilization, although a careful analysis reveals the persistence of many, and the tendency of each automatic action to establish its own associations according to the mental relations in which it regularly occurs. One of the great changes that has taken place may perhaps best be expressed by saying that in primitive culture the impressions of the outer world are

associated intimately with subjective impressions, which they call forth regularly, but which are determined largely by the social surroundings of the individual. Gradually the greater uncertainty of these connections, as compared to others, is recognized, that remains the same for all mankind, and in all forms of social surroundings, and thus sets in the gradual elimination of one subjective association after another, which culminates in the scientific method of the present day. We may express this also by saying that when we have our attention directed to a certain concept which has a whole fringe of incident concepts related to it, *we* at once associate it with that group which is represented by the category of causality. When the same concept appears in the mind of primitive man, it associates itself with those concepts related to it by emotional states.

If this is true, then the associations of the primitive mind are heterogeneous, and ours homogeneous and consistent only from our own point of view. To the mind of primitive man, only his own associations can be rational. Ours must appear to him just as heterogeneous as his to us, because the bond between the phenomena of the world, as it appears after the elimination of their emotional associations, which is being established with increasing knowledge, does not exist for *him*, while we can no longer feel the subjective associations that govern his mind.

This peculiarity of association is also another expression of the conservatism of primitive culture and the changeability of many features of our civilization. We tried to show that the resistance to change is largely due to emotional sources, and that in primitive culture emotional associations are the prevailing type. Hence resistance against the new. In our civilization, on the other hand, many actions are performed merely as means to a rational end. They do not enter sufficiently deeply into our minds to establish connections which would give them emotional values. Hence our readiness to change. We recognize, however, that we cannot remodel, without serious emotional resistance, any of the fundamental lines of thought and action which are determined by our early education, and which form the subconscious basis of all our activities. This is evinced by the attitude of civilized communities towards religion, politics, art, and the fundamental concepts of science.

In the average individual among primitive tribes reasoning cannot overcome this emotional resistance, and it therefore requires a destruction of the existing emotional associations by more powerful means to bring about a change. This may be brought about by some event which stirs up the mind of the people to its depths, or by economic and political changes against which resistance is impossible. In civilization there is a constant readiness to modify those activities

that have no emotional value. This is true not only of activities designed to meet a practical end, but also of others that have lost their associations, and that have become subject to fashion. There remain, however, others which are retained with great tenacity, and which hold their own against reasoning, because their strength lies in their emotional values. The history of the progress of science yields example after example of the power of resistance belonging to old ideas, even after increasing knowledge of the world has undermined the ground on which they were erected. Their overthrow is not brought about until a new generation has arisen, to whom the old is no longer dear and near.

Besides this, there are a thousand activities and modes of thought that constitute our daily life, of which we are not conscious at all until we come into contact with other types of life, or until we are prevented from acting according to our custom, that cannot in any way be claimed to be more reasonable than others, and to which, nevertheless, we cling. These, it would seem, are hardly less numerous in civilized than in primitive culture, because they constitute the whole series of well-established habits according to which the necessary actions of ordinary every-day life are performed, and which are learned less by instruction than by imitation.

Thus an important change from primitive culture to civilization seems to consist in the gradual elimination of what might be called the social associations of sense impressions and of activities, for which intellectual associations are gradually substituted. This process is accompanied by a loss of conservatism, which, however, does not extend over the field of habitual activities that do not come into consciousness, and only to a slight extent over those generalizations which are the foundation of all knowledge imparted in the course of education.

Franz Boas.